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SPEECHES  
OF  
HON. WILLIAM J. BURKE  
OF PENNSYLVANIA  
IN THE  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
NOVEMBER 12 and 14, 1919

Protesting against restricting rights  
of railroad employees, and defending  
American working people



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SPEECH  
OF  
HON. WILLIAM J. BURKE,  
OF PENNSYLVANIA.

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*November 12, 1919.*

REPLY TO ATTACK MADE RELATIVE TO USEFULNESS OF MEDIATION AND CONCILIATION; A DEFENSE OF THE AMERICAN WORKING PEOPLE AND PROTEST AGAINST THE ABUSE DIRECTED TOWARD LABOR AND LABOR LEADERS.

Mr. BURKE. Mr. Chairman, I want to thank the gentleman from Texas [Mr. BLANTON] for his fairness in asking for the 10 minutes' time for me. I also want to answer a challenge made by the gentleman from Texas [Mr. BLANTON] this morning as to what good results have been obtained by the mediation and conciliation boards. Right here, running into Washington when the men on a certain railroad property were about to leave the service, the management of that property asked for mediation and the railroad organization bowed to it and accepted mediation, and a settlement was effected that was agreeable to both sides, and in my opinion mediation is the only solution and the only way to settle differences. [Applause.] If I have a grievance and you do not agree with me the only thing to do is to have somebody that will bring us together so we can consult, and when we do agree, then it is satisfactory to all concerned. That is the only method. [Applause.] Now, speaking again of what good the mediation and conciliation board has done, in answer to my good friend from Illinois [Mr. CANNON], I will say, in 1916 the railroad organizations, while meeting in New York and representing all the railroad men in transportation service, were within a few hours of sending out notices withdrawing the men from the service because no settlement could be effected with the managers' committee. Again they bowed to mediation and the request of the President of the United States, and two hours after the President's request was made to the brotherhoods the representatives were on the way to Washington.

I have sat here day after day listening to Members of Congress blaming and accusing other Members of Congress with truckling to the railroad organizations. That is not the fact. The organizations, if anything, truckled to Congress when they obeyed the demand made by the board of mediation and the President and came here, although it is my opinion that one of the wisest things President Wilson ever did was to head off a great calamity, which was not of the railroad men's making. [Applause.] Now, again, the gentleman from Texas [Mr. BLANTON] said this morning that organized labor sat up the night before last talking about the strike, and I presume the position taken by the Attorney General. If this was done, the result was that once more organized labor put its Government above itself and bowed to that Government. [Applause.]

Almost since the beginning of this session of Congress I have sat here and listened to abuse heaped upon the workingmen of my country and upon the leaders of organized labor, and I have previously remarked upon the floor of this Chamber that this is not the place to air hatred and hostility to the working classes, that this is not what Congress is here for, and it is not what is expected of this Congress.

On Tuesday evening, October 28, 40,000 American men and women, residents of this great city, held a demonstration of welcome in honor of that "grand old man," President Gompers, of the American Federation of Labor. The demonstration was a sincere and voluntary tribute of love and confidence, and yet on the following day, October 29, the gentleman from Texas [Mr. BLANTON] tells this Congress that these 40,000 men and women were forced to march in the parade or pay a fine of \$5. Another incorrect statement.

On the same evening that this parade was held I sat with other Members of Congress on the platform and listened closely and attentively to Mr. Gompers addressing an audience of nearly 10,000 people, and in all the words Mr. Gompers uttered there was not one word of abuse, not one uncharitable thought, not one un-American sentiment, only a plain statement of facts and a request for a square deal for the workingmen of this country.

On Saturday afternoon, November 1, in this Congressional Chamber, for over an hour I listened to an argument about the hanging of the working people and the hanging of labor leaders, and one would have thought they were going to start right out on the hanging crusade. While all this was going on I thought of the great army of working people who served their country so loyally during the war, of the sacrifices they made for democracy. While Mr. BLANTON was making his talk my memory was busy recalling pictures of some of the men close to me who are in the labor movement. I thought of one of the leaders, James A. Nee, general chairman of the trainmen's organization on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, with four sons serving their country during the war, one of them now filling a soldier's grave; Mr. John Clair, another leader, and former general chairman of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers on the Baltimore & Ohio system, with four sons in service; innumerable men in all crafts of labor whom I know personally, who are active organization men, whose sons have been in service, some of them now lying in foreign graves, some of them returned home crippled for life. Twenty years ago a young sister of mine, dying, left her little family in my care; four of these boys, sons of a locomotive engineer, served their country; two of them are crippled for life, and one of them, 22 years of age, lies in a soldier's grave. Two boys of another deceased sister, their father a telegraph operator, served their country, but, fortunately, returned home safe.

There is hardly a time now that I make a railroad journey by night that I am not awakened by some one pulling the curtains of my berth, and I find some member of the crew, a heartbroken father, saying to me, "Bill, my boy lies in France. Is there not some way we can get his remains over here?"

Hardly a workingman's home but has felt the heavy hand of sorrow and care, either due directly to the war or to the epi-

demic of influenza that swept this country and which has been attributed to the war.

This is the reconstruction period of our country, the transition time from war to peace.

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Never before in the history of our Nation was there greater need of level heads, sober judgment, and sane thought from the national representatives of the people as at the present time. [Applause.] Prejudice and biased feelings should be obliterated and every energy bent in an effort to bring about a feeling of stability and security in the country.

We are confronted with a wave of dissatisfaction and industrial unrest sweeping over the country—not confined to one class of workers in particular but to all classes in general, and this applies not only to the organized worker but to the unorganized.

There is some undercurrent at work, some hidden hand, some unseen and powerful force which is subtly getting in its work, using whatever means and power it can command to further its interest and procure its end. In my mind the fault is not with the working people of the Nation, but it is with that sinister, unseen power and force, representing the corporate power and wealth of the country, which has brought every pressure to bear to dishonor labor, and which has deemed this the opportune time to attempt to put the chains of slavery on the working people and destroy their organized effort.

What are the working people of this country confronted with? Attempts made on all sides to oppress them; criticism and abuse heaped upon them because they had the manhood to ask for an adjustment of grievances and relief from the exorbitant cost of living. Wages have not kept pace with the cost of living, the necessities of life are beyond the reach of many a workingman and his family, but he must suffer, his children must want, they must go without sufficient nourishment so that the profiteers may continue their profiteering and the dollars pile up at the cost of humanity.

I want to say to this Congress that I have sat here and listened to some Members, who have taken advantage of this critical time to throw off the mask and show themselves in their true colors, the archenemies of labor, the foes of the working people. My blood has boiled with indignation at some of their absurd statements, their incorrect statements, their bitter and venomous attacks on the working people; and the only ray of comfort I could find was in the fact that if the people made the mistake of sending such men to Congress to protect their interest and to preserve the welfare of the Nation the mistake will never occur again, for they have showed in unmistakable terms that they are not representative of the people but of the special interests. And let me say here, too, that the special interests of the country are the instigators of the present industrial conflict. It seems to me that there is a well-defined movement on the part of organized capital started to destroy organization of the workers.

The power to strike is the only weapon labor has for the betterment of its condition in dealing with the combined power



of corporate wealth and greed. No individual can protect his rights in dealing with organized capital, and it is a hard struggle and uphill work to do it collectively. And yet we hear talk of antistrike laws; in fact, bills carrying this feature have been presented for action. Everything and anything is being done to strip the workingman naked of any power of redress, of any means that will help him secure justice and enable him to live as an American workingman should live. You can not enact into law any bill that will make slaves of freemen. The people of the country will not stand for it. Instead of a Nation of law-abiding citizens we would have a Nation of lawbreakers. Compulsory servitude has no place in this Republic; the American people will not tolerate it, and the American people will not wear the chains of slavery.

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PROTEST AGAINST LABOR PROVISIONS OF ESCH BILL AND AGAINST  
RESTRICTING THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES OF RAILROAD EM-  
PLOYEES.

*November 12, 1919.*

Mr. BURKE. Mr. Chairman, I sat here yesterday forenoon and closely listened to the able and eloquent address delivered by Mr. Esch on this bill.

Last night I talked with and listened to the representatives of over 2,000,000 railroad men who are affected by this bill, and every one of the representatives of the men were fearful of the provisions of this bill where it governed them; these men believed, and I am of the same opinion, that with the creation of such boards and the powers granted them by this bill the hands of labor are tied; that labor is shut off from further advancement, further progress; and that even a new contract or agreement would be a thing of the past. For the first time in history by legislation it is proposed to put a club in the hands of corporate interests to use over labor organizations to the extent that it can reach into the treasury of the organizations and seize their funds.

The bill provides for the welfare of the railroads; it proposes to finance them, to see that they are in position to successfully operate when returned to private ownership; it protects property rights but it destroys human rights. If the roads are to be returned to private ownership, then the least thing this Congress can do is to return the roads the same as they found them when they took them over, with free men in the service. It is an injustice, a crime, to shackle the railroad men, to fasten upon them restrictions, to violate the privileges and rights they have always had, and which they have never abused. It is a poor return for their loyal and patriotic service.

Another thing, with the great unrest existing it would be a greater wrong for this Congress to add to this unrest by creating a law that would only make worse the existing state of discontent. You can not destroy the rights of citizens of this country; you can not make slaves of freemen and expect the people to accept the condition without protest. Injustice breeds resentment.

Congress should exert every effort and energy to bring about a feeling of stability and security in the country—to restore

confidence in the hearts of the people. This can never be accomplished by unjust, unwise legislation. The bill before us has been in the hands of the committee for 10 weeks, and yet yesterday morning I gleaned from the remarks made by Mr. Esch that that part of the bill dealing with the formation of the board he was not quite sure himself about its features. This bill has only been in the hands of Congress a little over 24 hours; it consists of 86 pages, and I believe it is too important a piece of legislation, too far-reaching in its effects, to be railroaded through here at the closing days of this Congress. In the interest of the people it affects, and in order that every Member should have ample time to study the bill and familiarize himself with its features and their consequences, it is my conviction that the wisest, safest, and best thing to do is to place it on the calendar, and when Congress meets again in December take up the bill and strip it of the provisions that are unjust, harmful, and injurious to the railroad employees.

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PROTEST AGAINST THE ADOPTION OF THE WEBSTER SUBSTITUTE TO  
THE LABOR SECTION OF THE ESCH BILL, BELIEVING IT TO BE UN-  
AMERICAN IN PRINCIPLE AND THAT IT WOULD ENSLAVE TWO  
MILLION RAILROAD EMPLOYEES.

*November 14, 1919.*

Mr. BURKE. Mr. Chairman, there are two substitutes affecting this bill before this body. One the substitute offered by the gentleman from Washington [Mr. WEBSTER] and the other the substitute offered by the gentleman from Minnesota [Mr. ANDERSON].

The substitute of the gentleman from Washington [Mr. WEBSTER] is so un-American in principle as to be unworthy the serious consideration of this American Congress. Mr. WEBSTER, with his substitute, is anxious, eager, and willing to place the chains of slavery on 2,000,000 railroad employees, but I doubt very much if he will find a majority of this Congress anxious and eager and willing to cooperate with him in his efforts.

The men who man the trains of the great transportation companies—the men who are operating in the towers, the men in the yards—the great mass of railroad employees who would suffer and be penalized and shackled under the Webster substitute, are all men with pure red American blood in their veins; just as good an American citizen—just as loyal an American citizen as you or myself, and I want to say I yield to no one in my loyalty to my country and its flag.

The men in transportation service are the custodians of life and property; every member of the crew feels keenly the responsibility of his position; each has his important work and place—each is the captain of his own job; he is not inexperienced, but is trained by years of experience for the position and responsibility assumed.

When you board a train your life is in the keeping of that crew; while you are sleeping, you are safeguarded and protected by the men in charge of the train—men who are alert and watchful for the safety of the train and the lives of the passengers committed to their care. The very worst thing that

could be done—the worst calamity that could happen would be to oppress and enslave the railroad men; the heart-love they have for their work would be destroyed. And let me say, further, that if by any remote chance the Webster substitute was enacted into law, that I do not believe the railroads of the country could keep, hire, or find enough men to operate the trains, for there are few men in America willing to surrender their American birthright of freedom in order to work for railroad corporations.

The second substitute, the one offered by Mr. ANDERSON, from Minnesota, is, in my opinion, a just and fair one, and I believe will be acceptable to both labor and the public. It will be a hard matter, and a difficult one, to convince the American people that it is just to return the railroads to private ownership, well-looked after and generously financed, and at the same time return the men the Government took over as free men, shackled with the chains of slavery. By such an act, Congress would record itself as protecting and favoring property rights above human rights. I am for the Anderson amendment, because, as I stated, I believe it is both just and fair. [Applause.]

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